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Fund Proposed To Reduce Blight

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Hartford Mayor Eddie A. Perez is proposing a \$50 million fund to address blight in various city neighborhoods, money he says will be used to attract private developers to turn boarded-up buildings into affordable rental and homeownership opportunities.

"We do a lot of small stuff and never connect it," Perez said Friday. "The only way you're going to take those [buildings] on is to put some resources on the table to attract the other investment that's needed."

Perez plans to make the proposal at his state of the city address Monday night.

The city has made some progress addressing blighted buildings, but a more comprehensive approach is necessary to deal with about 165 remaining structures that need attention, Perez said. To do that, the city could acquire buildings, either through foreclosure or through eminent domain, or it could use the money to work with private developers to acquire the properties and convert them to a better use, he said.

"We can really erase the blight that continues to plague a few of our neighborhoods," said John F. Palmieri, the city's director of development services. "There's not a whole lot of magic here. We know the tools that we have and we know what we'd do if we had the money."

The six target areas with clusters of dilapidated and blighted structures are in the Clay Arsenal, Upper Albany, Northeast, Parkville, Frog Hollow, and South Green neighborhoods.

Should the mayor's proposal take shape and get council approval, city staff would next go through the process of developing a budget and a strategy to incrementally spend the \$50 million over a series of years. The plan could use some already-approved but unallocated borrowed money, city officials said.

"I think we'd make significant progress within short order," Palmieri said.

Mike Meotti, now president of the United Way of Connecticut, spent several years with the Connecticut Policy and Economic Council creating an inventory of the city's blighted structures. He likes the mayor's idea, he said.

"The problems are the same complex problems in the biggest cities, but the physical space you're dealing with is relatively tiny," Meotti said. "In a small place, \$50 million - if well positioned - could have a big impact."

But implementation and strategy are the key, he said. "Even in a city as small as Hartford, though, it could just kind of seep through the cracks," Meotti said.

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